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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how one teacher educator returned to the middle school classroom. In order to update her skills and knowledge, the author worked on a master's degree. One course that she took was in oral history interviewing. She had often used historical letters and journals with students to explore individual descriptions of history, but this class let her experience the process of oral history firsthand. She believed that using oral history interviews in teaching could create a strong sense of relevance in addition to emotional involvement. The graduate class framed interview questions and discussed the degree to which they should probe interviewees' personal lives and thoughts. The class decided that their goal was to elicit a clear understanding of the interviewee's conceptualization of good teaching. This meant framing questions that targeted the desired information. The paper describes how this teacher felt as she probed into her interviewee's life and feelings, noting questions and complications that she encountered. It presents the interviewee's oral history of teaching in the turbulent 1960s, describing her role as teacher, mentor, coach, and mediator. The paper concludes by discussing issues encountered when conducting oral history in the practice of teaching (focusing on the teacher-researcher's middle school classroom). (SM)

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PERSPECTIVES ON THE EXPLORATIONS OF DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING OF TEACHING THROUGH ORAL HISTORY:

A RETURNING TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

presented by

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> If you focus your attention on what students need, then you can, through a variety of ways, teach them how to learn, then your job is accomplished. You do this by developing a relationship with them, so that there isn't any conflict between you. Teachers show children that they are interested in learning everyday of their lives.
>
> Eva Kas (Pseudonym; Interview Transcript, 1998)

On May 12, 1998, I met Eva Kas, University of Washington Teacher Education Program Supervisor. Our interview meeting was the culminating piece of an oral history class project to investigate what constitutes "good teaching to supervisors of student teachers." The class was designed to create an interview questionnaire, practice interview techniques, and ultimately conduct the oral history interview.. Furthermore, we studied the impact of oral history interviews and how to analyze the information we obtained. The actual interview was the birth after laborious hours of preparation, research and collaboration. Throughout the interview and still today, I hear Eva's words which give me confidence and inspiration in my teaching career. The oral history process builds an organic web which shifts and reconfigures as it extends to attract and impact increasing numbers of lives. Had it not been for this particular oral history interview, I would not be living in my school community quite as effectively or fearlessly as I am today.

I am returning to teaching after having taken time out to be with my children. Currently I teach middle school. As a way to update my skills and knowledge, I pursued a longtime goal to earn a master's degree. I was drawn to this particular graduate class in oral history interviewing for several reasons. I have had a life-long interest in the historical perspective of ordinary folks. I have effectively used historical letters and journals with students to explore individual descriptions of history. However, to experience the past from the viewpoint of living individuals offers an unsurpassed intimacy and immediacy. Oral history interviews can create a strong sense relevance in addition to emotional involvement. As an educator, I wanted to experience the process firsthand so that I could share it with students.

SUGGESTIONS FOR CONDUCTING ORAL HISTORIES

In a 1986 paper entitled "Oral History in the Classroom" presented at the Texas Council for Social Studies, Lynn Burlbaw defined oral history as, "A document created by two people in order to make a record of knowledge held by one of the people so the knowledge will be available to others...once that person is no longer available as a source of information." This definition was expanded by Lehan and Goldman in 1997, "Oral history is a systematic interview to preserve memories of ordinary men and women. It offers a true and balanced picture of history." These authors offer the conceptual constructs that make oral history a valuable research tool. Valerie Yow (1994) provides the neophyte interviewer with the requisite processes and procedures. Her suggestions proved invaluable in guiding my work through all stages of the oral history process.

Most people envision themselves as capable of an easy going, flowing and captivating interview style akin to that of Studs Turkle. I like to talk; I am a teacher. Likewise, I am reasonably curious about the lives of others. I thought I was a natural candidate for being an oral history interviewer. I enjoyed the necessary historical backdrop research in order to understand the times in which my interviewee lived and worked.

As our class began the challenging task of framing the interview questions, we found that we had opened a vista of options. While developing the interview questions, we discovered it was difficult to pare away the interesting but ultimately irrelevant questions. Shaping the questions provoked a few disputes about the purpose, direction and focus of our interviews. We discussed the degree to which we should probe interviewees' personal lives and thoughts. The sessions developing the interview questions were dynamic and helpful in clarifying a road map and destination. We constantly reminded

each other that our goal was to elicit a clear understanding of the interviewee's conceptualization of "good teaching." This meant framing questions that targeted this information.

An interesting self-revelation was my reticence to probe into issues that I considered too personal. My fellow students vociferously helped me overcome this challenge to relevant lines of questioning. For example, if an interviewee shared personal information, should we ask clarifying questions? I felt the statement should be accepted at face value and we should not probe further. However, others thought the issues should be pursued in a sensitive manner for clarity and understanding. In retrospect, this was one of the most valuable learnings of the endeavor. Indeed, this very issue did arise in my interview. As Eva shared early childhood experiences, I asked questions that led to a deeper understanding of her future motives and goals in education. I now feel confident leading my students through this process, which clarifies goals and procedures. One takes confidence from the fact that many voices have shaped the questions that will be taken to the interview

One of the more personally challenging aspects of oral history interviewing is the plethora of details to be confronted. I am not a detail-oriented person and found these tasks intimidating. Words like liability, release and consent forms, and backup equipment almost daunted me. Yow rescued me with checklists which I dutifully marked off during the interview. Organization is a confidence builder in these circumstances. As interviewer, one must simultaneously attend to several tasks: interviewing; equipment operation; time; interviewee's comfort. It is difficult to focus on these aspects of the process, while actively listening. Sometimes the interviewee brings up unanticipated and valuable topics which the interviewer will want to pursue with newly framed questions. Furthermore, the interviewer must be responsive to the needs of the interviewee. For example, they may tire or object to certain questions. Interviewers must internalize the concept of grace under fire, which proves an invaluable skill. The exhilaration of success has buoyed and spurred me, and subsequently my students, on to new projects.

One of the attractions of this oral history project was exploring a long held personal belief that there are as many renditions of an incident as there are observers of the event. This verity came to life for me when I critically evaluated Eva's account against my historical research as well as my own recollections. For example, does the interviewee's account complement or contradict historical background research? Our debriefing discussions led to probing reflections on "Whose story is history?" Oral historians become more critical consumers of information. Likewise, the oral history process introduces a broadened base for valuable sources of information on the past.

Of course the most gratifying piece of the oral history is listening to the interviewee. The word listen comes to have new and portentous meanings. Modeling active listening while remaining quiet is a skill that demands exhibiting many modes of silently responsive listening. To illustrate, I began to feel self-conscious nodding affirmatively, while maintaining a permanently affixed smile. However, it did encourage Eva to proceed, knowing I was following her conversation. Interviewers need to remain silent to enable the person to tell their story in their own way, in their own words. The purpose of oral history is to hear the interviewee's story in the way they choose to tell it. An interruption can significantly alter the pace and content of the oral history.

The interview process with Eva was an awesome phenomenon. We began as strangers and proceeded to a familiar intimacy with a certain, swift ease. Yow recounts many instances in which this does not happen; I realize I was fortunate in my assignment. Eva is a self-assured and forthright woman. She has faced dilemmas and gained an objective perspective. Consequently, she responded frankly while revealing a person of fortitude, integrity and genuine humanity. The gratifying phase of oral history is simply hearing the story.

EVA'S ORAL HISTORY: TEACHING IN THE TURBULENT SIXTIES

Eva's story has a humble beginning: the seventh of eight children in a migrant farm family in the Netherlands. By the late 1940's, the family had emigrated to Ontario, Canada, retaining migrant farmer status. The family had little money and coupled with a rigid Calvinist faith, Eva's life was dreary and fraught with incomprehensible rules, punishments and sacrifice. However, her indomitable spirit led

her to find adult mentors and joyful activities in the one room schools she attended. A self-directed learner, she soon outstripped older students with her intellect. The poverty of her family relationships was assuaged by the loving concern and guidance of her teachers. I admired her ability to overcome the economic and emotional poverty of her background and forge ahead. Hardly a victim of circumstances, Eva took the experiences and drew strength from adversity. "We have to have the drive ourselves," she says. This determination became a hallmark of her conceptualization of good teaching. Teachers must show concern and support, while offering guidance, but teachers' main goal must be to foster within the student a sense of responsibility for learning.

> "I became a teacher because I valued their contribution to my life. If I liked a teacher, I would do anything for that teacher. My favorite teacher connected with students. She had high expectations, but would support us anyway she could. She would fight to the death against anyone who tried to hurt us." E.K.6&13

These words were electrifying to me. Eva clothed with words my own similar but amorphous feelings about an emotional connection with students. My Teacher Education Program, twenty years ago, cautioned against an emotional dynamic between teacher and students. However, my most stunning early successes with students arrived on the heels of personal rapport. Instinctively, I saw a caring, supportive relationship as motivational for students. I also think respect, trust and honesty are foundational to education. Teachers must listen to students and respond to their requests, which fosters a bond of trust between them. Students come to believe the teacher cares enough about their well-being to be compassionately responsive. This type of environment encourages the level of honesty necessary for effective and authentic learning to occur. Everyday at school, I recall Eva's words and smile with confidence that these students can rely on me. However, Eva admonished that this relationship has little to do with being "friends." That wall should not be scaled by teacher or student. Eva's attitudes were formed by a teacher education program that differed dramatically and structurally from my own.

In my interview with Eva, I was surprised by the progressivist teacher education program she had attended. I had naively surmised that all preparation programs were similar, only to discover that Eva's was the more progressive, while predating mine by many years. Eva began teaching while she matriculated a fifth-year certification program some thirty years ago. Her courses focused on how students learn and on varied instructional strategies to meet a diverse population of learners. Of paramount importance to her was the supportive interpersonal dynamic established with her university supervisors. "If I had any doubts, weaknesses, or failings, I could talk to that person. They were responsive to our needs. They were a support system." E.K. 9-10 Likewise, her fellow student teachers formed a support system for each other, sharing ideas and problem-solving. Although Eva values education, she took care not to become overly subject oriented. "Teachers who were subject oriented were not as willing to take care of my emotional needs." E.K. 6

Eva's role as mentor, coach, mediator fit the zeitgeist. Her career was set against the backdrop of the turbulent sixties. Her recollections describe cultural loss. She bemoans the loss of authority, family life, community and innocence. The bullets that shot Kennedy and King ripped through the fabric of society as well. The capstone events were the Viet Nam War, a stagnant economy requiring two earner families, and the Civil Rights Movement. E.K. 16 Suddenly teachers floundered to achieve a clear understanding of their role as educators.

Fractured family life and a mobile society contributed to the removal of student support networks. Teachers were poised to fill the vacuum. However, the increasing student needs has begun to blur the role of teacher and care-giver. Teachers began to be blamed for student suicides. They were expected to teach character, drug, and sex education. Increasingly teachers were held accountable for student dysfunction. Meanwhile, teachers were threatened because of lackluster academic performance by students. "Teachers became confused and lost their way. They didn't know anymore what their purpose was." E.K. 14 There is not a practitioner who has not felt the burden of the confusion

engendered by the changing role of teachers. Eva began to experience the sense of isolation that grows in an atmosphere of fear and confusion.

Educators closed their classroom doors and wondered if others fared and coped better than they. This isolation has almost become a trademark of the profession. This development activated one of Eva's core beliefs, namely that it is curative to voice complaints, but be prepared to shape a solution. In 1989, Eva was offered one of the first among several administrative positions ranging from principalships to superintendencies. She learned the power of politics as she fended off quarrelsome school board members and sought to protect the well being of students and teachers. Eva had come full circle, it was her chance to return what she had received. She spent little time in her office, choosing instead to visit classrooms, working with teachers to solve problems, and getting to know students. The final piece of "Eva's Theory of Education" was falling into place: teachers must open their classroom doors.

"I think a lot of teachers are on their own. They go into their classroom, they're isolated. If they're not doing well, they won't tell anybody. If they have needs, they don't want anyone to know, because they feel like they're failing. I began to realize that teachers have a need to talk, to have a support system, to be able to say, 'I tried this and it didn't work.' They feel threatened by fellow teachers. Teachers should see other teachers teaching. Isolation hides bad teachers and limits the effect of good teachers." E.K 15-22 Eva began to confer with teachers, listening to their problems and helping them to strategize solutions. As she discussed this "silo effect" in teaching, I had an epiphany. My self-doubts came into perspective: if this distinguished educator worried about others skills outstripping hers, then my similar concerns were commonplace. This year I have made extensive efforts to engage my colleagues in conversations about teaching issues. It has been refreshing to hear similar dilemmas and to brainstorm solutions together. I believe the attitude of our school community is more open, healthier, and more productive. If nothing else, I feel relieved to have discovered friends rather than competitors.

CONDUCTING ORAL HISTORY IN THE PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Oral history is a natural for the classroom. Students who normally balk at the tedium and irrelevancy of history are taken with the immediacy of personal accounts of past events. They want to be knowledgeable when talking with interviewees, so research and data gathering is no longer a conflicted issue. Students are willing to prepare impressive, thorough historical background portfolios. They become engaged developing an interviewing tool in which they have a stake and will take to the interview with pride. Oral history is an invaluable tool for teaching history, interview questionnaire development, and interviewing skills.

Currently, my middle school class is conducting an oral history of our school. Many subject areas can be integrated into the process. We are using geometry and math skills in measuring the perimeter and area of the lot and building. Students will be using computer programs to design needed room additions. They will use Language arts skills writing government officials to obtain land use requirements. Critical thinking and problem-solving skills are in constant use as we discuss the varying points of view our interviewees have expressed in their accounts of the school since its establishment in 1970. The process has animated my students. They share my enthusiasm for comparing the past with their experience of the present. They understand more fully their connection with their heritage and their responsibility for shaping the future. These concepts have led to a deepened understanding of citizenship. Our discussions have expanded into lively evaluative and problem-solving projects. However, the most important dimension of the project is the community-building aspect of the interactions between the students and the adults in the school community. A link has been forged that is beneficial for all.

Oral history offers a rich addition to the curriculum. Students learn a constellation of skills while acquiring a critically analytical view of history. The interviewee offers a fresh and unique perspective of the past, while feeling augmented and valued for sharing their story. Wisdom has taken a beating in

contemporary information-saturated culture. Oral history can be a vehicle for self-exploration against the backdrop of others' wisdom.

I learned on many levels while listening to Eva's story. Her words provided me with the incentive to make immediate changes in the way I teach. I felt endorsed in establishing emotional bonds with students, as well as meeting individual needs as responsibly as possible. I learned that communicating my needs to others isn't failure or weakness, it is discussing mutual challenges. Indeed, as I reviewed the interview transcript to write this paper, I discovered something I had not fully recognized. Eva advocates students taking responsibility for their learning.
I did not fully understand how to implement this in the classroom. I realized I have been doing this by having students work in groups, designing in a constructivist process how learning will take place, how it will be demonstrated and shared, and the assessment rubrics. At last I understand what she meant by talking about student responsibility and teacher not "Controlling each step." E.K. 5 I can attest to the oral history process being a transformative one.

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